Interview with Joseph J. Sisco

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

UNDER SECRETARY JOSEPH J. SISCO

Interviewed by: Michael Sterner

Initial interview date: March 19th, 1990

This is an interview with The Honorable Joseph J. Sisco conducted by Michael Sterner. The date is March 19th, 1990.

Q: Joe, tell us a little bit about your background and how you got started in a career in international affairs.

SISCO: Well, Mike, I think there were really two things. In undergraduate school I was a history major and that included European history. But the real catalyst was World War II when I served in the Pacific and where I had an opportunity to see more of the world than I really wanted to at that particular juncture. So that when I left the service after the war I went back—I had already started graduate school at the University of Chicago—and I got my master's degree and my Ph.D., interestingly enough in Soviet affairs where I took Russian language studies as well.

Q: Were you ever tempted in the direction of being an academic? You also got a Ph.D., but that was later on?

SISCO: No, no. I got my Ph.D. before I came into government, and actually, Mike, my notion at that time was, I really ought to get a couple of years of government experience

before I went to the academic field to teach. But two years became twenty-five. I liked what I was doing in government. And interestingly enough I had applied a foreign affairs position in State, but there were no openings at that time and therefore I took a job in the CIA. I started my government career in the CIA, and then after six months I was able to transfer because there was an opening.

Q: What were your first assignments in State.

SISCO: They were largely in the UN Bureau.

Q: I associate you as being almost entirely in the UN Bureau until you came over to Near East and South Asian Affairs.

SISCO: The wonderful part about being in that bureau, and not enough people in the service really realize this, is that it has two dimensions that are very broadening and I found very helpful. First of all, by virtue of the fact that every General Assembly opens in the fall and there are over a hundred items on the Assembly agenda, it covers the world. And while obviously it covers specific issues from the point of view of what is happening in multilateral diplomacy, the fact of the matter is that when you're dealing with that particular issue you have to get into the substance. That's the first thing. The second thing is that there is the practical experience at the UN in itself that goes beyond the normal bilateral interactions that are so typical of the work in one single embassy vis-a-vis one country. There at the UN it was not only a set of negotiations on different specific issues, and a variety of countries that were involved, but there was a private dimension as well as a public dimension, as well as a legislative dimension. So that those factors, I think, tended to give me what I considered to be an excellent practical experience very early in the game. And moreover because one was involved as well in the public dimension. The demands of the job were to be able to write, and to be able to write quickly, particularly if some public statement had to be made. So there was the public affairs dimension as well.

I can't say enough for that experience in terms of being helpful in whatever I may have done in later years.

Q: Joe, you've seen in the course of your IO career, you've seen many American UN Representatives up there. Who were the most effective in your opinion? And in particular what issues do you think were well handled?

SISCO: We had a tremendous variety, and you will recall, Mike, that a number of the United States representatives to the UN were selected for their stature, their visibility, and certainly in the earlier days—say the first twenty years after World War II—it was a position that was consciously attractive to a number of outstanding figures and therefore you had people originally like Warren Austin. You had people like Arthur Goldberg, Adlai Stevenson, and President Bush as an ambassador. Goldberg, I would have to say, was an outstanding negotiator, and in my book is really the architect of Security Council Resolution 242. I think he did a remarkable job, and because President Johnson gave him broad latitude in what might be acceptable to the United States, he had great flexibility and therefore in many respects, in addition to putting to good use his negotiating ability that he had achieved in the context of being a labor lawyer, likewise Secretary of Labor, and so on, he was able to get positions for the United States of a much more flexible character than perhaps others might not have been able to do. Adlai Stevenson, of course, was remarkable in the sense of his popularity. He was sought after. He was particularly strong in the speech making, in the public dimension of the UN work. He was less interested in the nitty-gritty of negotiating a tough resolution, in sharp contrast, I might add, with his successor, namely Arthur Goldberg. I think George Bush was one of our most effective UN ambassadors. He was not there a very long time, but one outstanding feature that I can recall is that he was a real team player: he was popular with other representatives, he did a very strong job of representation. But what struck me was that he worked so closely in harness with the administration in Washington. And historically, if you look at that job, that wasn't always the case because there was a tendency, first of all, on the part of our presidents to oversell the UN job. President Johnson, in effect, made the

job sound to someone like Goldberg as a second Secretary of State job. And you know the number of the difficulties that resulted from the notion that that job was tantamount to that of Secretary of State. And we had our difficulties under Stevenson, we had our difficulties under Goldberg. We didn't have that kind of a difficulty with George Bush who concerted very, very closely both with the State Department, as well as the White House, and therefore did a highly effective job.

Q: I think you see his attachment to the UN in his selection of Tom Pickering who is one of our outstanding professionals now. As you look back over your association with that institution dating back to World War II, how do you see the evolution of the institution itself? Many people feel that the UN started out with a great deal of promise, but that it has lost its impact in the world and particularly that it has become very seriously distorted away from the notion of solving world problems, toward being a sounding board for the third world.

SISCO: First, Mike, let me say that the expectations at the outset were much too high. The UN is made up of sovereign states and it reflects an international consensus to the degree to which a consensus can develop. The fundamental assumption of the UN was that the major powers would cooperate—the permanent members of the Security Council—in achieving Pacific Settlement and collective security. Shortly after World War II the cold war began between the United States and the Soviet Union, and therefore the fundamental assumption that the major powers would cooperate was undermined, and there was no cooperation. It was a question of the United States taking the lead, and the achievements that were possible were largely because of the fact that we had broad support in the world, and therefore at the UN most of America's policies were adopted.

That changed mid-way when twenty-one new members were added to the UN, and at the time the UN came under challenge from Khrushchev when Dag Hammarskjold was the Secretary General. What happened at that particular period was that the UN moved from a U.S. dominated organization to one where there was a stalemate, where neither side

could really put together the kind of majority that allowed the organization to do its work. And that's where the phrase came into being that many people are not very familiar with, namely, “give it to Dag”: Meaning hand the problem over to the Secretary General largely because East and West could not really get together.

But I'm hopeful now, simply because, one, we've gone through a very difficult period and there's much more realism about both the capacities and the limitations of the UN. But the most fundamental fact is that to the degree to which the United States and the Soviet Union can continue to reduce tensions, and to cooperate in and out of the UN, this will allow and permit the UN to be more effective because it is an indispensable third party element. And what you have here in 1989 and 1990 are magnificent examples of where the third party role of the UN is acceptable to both major powers and therefore making a major contribution. And we're talking about a UN role in Cambodia, the ongoing role in a place like Kashmir, certainly a very significant role over decades that you and I are particularly familiar with, namely the Middle East. You have the UN having played a role in the recent Nicaraguan elections.

The Soviets, for example, are now using the phrase “collective security”, because that was, after all, the original concept of the charter. And we invented the phrase “peace keeping” largely because of the fact that it was somewhere between Chapter 6 (Pacific Settlement) in the Charter, and collective security (enforcement action, so-called Chapter 7) in the charter. Peace keeping was somewhere in between, six-and-a-half, if you will. We may very well get back to the original concept of collective security if in fact Soviet and American parallel interests can develop further because the organization will be of greater utility to both major powers and to the world generally. Also the UN is experienced and well suited to play a role in the social agenda of the 90's—health, environment, and the like.

Q: Joe, let's talk a little bit about the 1967 Arab-Israel crisis because this is a very good example of an effective role of the United Nations. But to begin with there was U

Thant's precipitate withdrawal of the UNEF from Sinai. Do you share the view of many commentators that that was really a failure in statesmanship on his part?

SISCO: I do, and I'm afraid our good friend, Ralph Bunche, contributed to that. I believe there was an opportunity to delay matters rather than bring them to a confrontational stage. As I've reviewed the record over the years, it seems to me Nasser didn't expect that kind of a precipitous and quick withdrawal. And therefore, unfortunately, the precipitous move tended to deepen the crisis, rather than alleviate it.

Q: Do you think the United States did everything it could during that three week preliminary period before the Israelis finally decided to invade? To defuse it, and to prevent war?

SISCO: I think we did. We, of course, were very concerned about the Soviet position in all of this. I think it took us all a bit by surprise, and it was a crisis that, at least the perception within the State Department was, that it was a crisis that need not have occurred. And it was one that was precipitated in this particular instance by Nasser and Egypt.

Q: As I remember it there was a plan by Nasser to send over Zakaria Mohieddine toward the very end, and Egyptians tend to claim that he was coming with a deal of some sort. Do you credit that? Do you think the war was avertible if we had been able to hold off the Israelis for another ten days, or whatever?

SISCO: Very difficult to speculate, and I don't really have a very clear judgment to make. I rather doubt it, quite frankly, but I don't think I add anything to the historic record other than this kind of intuitive reaction. There's no way to really know in hindsight.

Q: The Israelis, of course, won a stunning victory in that conflict and in a sense, I think, all of the United States policy makers were enormously relieved that it was as fast, and as decisive, as it was, particularly because there was a real danger of a U.S.-Soviet confrontation if it had gone wrong, or if it had been prolonged.

Looking now at the aftermath, tell us a little bit about your role at the time. Also, whether you played a part in the formulation of the United States position coming out of the war. And as I remember it, the first comprehensive announcement of American post-war policy was Johnson's June 20th speech in which there was really a decisive change in American policy from the 1958 period when we brought pressure on Israel to withdraw. In this case we were saying, in effect, “You're entitled to hang on to the territories until the Arabs come forward with some kind of negotiation for peace.”

SISCO: Well, yes. One, it was viewed, of course, as an important “victory”, largely because of the denial of opportunity to the Soviet Union, because it was a period, of poor relationships between Moscow and Washington. So in that sense it was an example, in the view of some, of where the Israeli action helped the interests of the United States in the broader, big power, context.

As I look back on that particular period, I think that's the one development that changed the whole course of the Middle East right to this day. Because while that June '67 Israeli military victory was overwhelming, it ushered in a period of stalemate. And it wasn't until war came in '73 when the military result was inconclusive, in sharp contrast with the overwhelming Israeli military victory in '67, that it was possible to get to the negotiating table. Largely because of the fact, as you well know, that inconclusive result in '73 was viewed, rightly in my judgement, at least as a partial Arab victory, and reduced the psychological feelings on the Arab side that they would be going to the conference table as an inferior, defeated power. So '67, in my book, is really a watershed event which has influenced a number of the developments in the area to this day.

My own role focused largely on the UN context. And interestingly enough much of the policy that developed was really in the UN context, much more than in the bilateral setting.

Q: Well, tell us a little bit about that. You were backstopping that whole effort to get Security Council resolution 242, and as I remember it was quite a complicated and also lengthy negotiation.

SISCO: Yes, almost six months.

Q: ...almost six months it took to negotiate that. There were many drafts, including a "Latin American" resolution, as I remember. Dig into your memory a little bit and tell us how the resolution in its final form finally evolved.

SISCO: Well, you put it very accurately. One, the UN was seized of the problem, and it was viewed rightly, as the number one political problem at that particular juncture with all of the risks that it entailed. The Latin Americans were involved, but just about every area in one way or another, at some point, played a role. But the lead throughout was really the United States, as might be expected. And the situation really was multi-dimensional in the sense that we were a central feature in the negotiations between the Israelis and the Arabs. And again, these are negotiations being conducted in an indirect sort of way. And, of course, the critical factor was the degree to which we could work matters out with the Soviet Union as well. So that it was a constant round of negotiations in and around the setting of the UN Security Council. The British played a role. But when you got to the end of the line, the critical division can really be stated very simply: the Arab position was that the resolution 242 should say, total Israeli withdrawal to the pre-June '67 lines. Whereas our position was that there should be withdrawal, but the question of how much withdrawal, and to where, was a matter that was subject to negotiations. And therefore the ultimate compromise came about in a preambulary paragraph in Security Council Resolution 242 which expressed the principal of non-acquisition of territory. But by the same token the critical operative paragraph, calling for withdrawal as a matter of principle, leaving out the articles, and leaving open the question of partial or whole, and to what lines, was subject to negotiation. And the interesting feature is that when you then begin to look at the Egyptian-Israeli treaty subsequently, even though that resolution never said

“total Israeli withdrawal to the pre-June '67 lines” in the case of the Egyptian treaty that's exactly what the Egyptians got. So that's, I think, a very, very interesting feature. Not that it would be precedential in terms of the West Bank and the Gaza, or Syria, but interesting to show that there was flexibility in the negotiation.

Moreover, there were different positions because at an earlier phase there were some who were disposed to accept a cease fire on the basis of the then existing constellation of forces, and then subsequently the question of withdrawal to the status quo ante being really the predominant factor.

There is historic argument as to who should claim credit, and certainly Lord Caradon of Great Britain has claimed credit for being the sponsor and the draftsman. What happened really was that the language was developed by the United States, and for reasons of legislative tactics the final compromise, in terms of the language, we put in the hands of the British as a sponsor.

Q: Later on, the Israelis, or at least the Begin government, made quite a point of the fact that Resolution 242 doesn't have to apply equally in terms of its withdrawal provisions to all fronts, and they have attempted to say, the resolution could mean total withdrawal from Sinai, but it could also mean no withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Do you recall in the genesis of Resolution 242 that the Israeli government at the period argued along those lines.

SISCO: Not at all. In fact the Israeli position was the same as ours. At the time of the adoption of Security Council Resolution 242, there was no ambiguity, either among the members of the Security Council, or between ourselves, and Israel. That Security Council resolution (242) applied to all of the territories. It applied not only to the Sinai, it applied to the West Bank, to Gaza, to the Golan Heights. And we, in the later years, in many of the Camp David documents, and so on, developed the phrase that the resolution had to be applied “in all of its parts”. There was never any doubt in this regard and the beginning

of the revisionist view started with Prime Minister Begin. It was interestingly enough not a view, held by the prior Israeli governments. And even to this day, as a matter of fact, there is a distinction between the Likud position and the Labor party position. The labor party position continues to be, that in order to achieve peace, you have to exchange territory for peace. Likewise, Labor has not adopted the position that by virtue of the fact that we've achieved an Egyptian-Israeli treaty, that Security Council Resolution 242 need not be applicable now to other parts of the occupied territories. It just isn't so.

Q: Right. Joe, on Jerusalem, we're seeing the issue of Jerusalem now coming up front and forward once again. In those days, as I remember it, there was a sort of sliding process whereby at the very beginning the Israelis...treated East Jerusalem as part of occupied territory. But in the course of, about the six months that it took to negotiate resolution 242, there was an evolution in the Israeli position where they treated annexation of the whole city as being a fait accompli. Do you remember how that evolved, and what is your feeling about the American position as it finally took place?

SISCO: There's nothing that occurred within the context of 242 in so far as the American position is concerned that altered the original American position that Jerusalem should be a corpus separatum, and that Jerusalem was a matter of negotiations.

Q: So what you're saying is that really in spite of the result of the '67 war, the earlier premise that Jerusalem was a special case, and to be treated separately, was carried forward.

SISCO: ...carried forward, and when I said that 242 was applicable I didn't mean to imply that there was a specific applicability to Jerusalem as such. It was recognized that whatever occurred had to be negotiated between sides. We underscored at that time the need for access to the Holy Places. And later on, and I can't really put the exact date on it, we also began to emphasize that Jerusalem should no longer ever be divided again. But as I recall, that was at a later stage.

Q: Let's see, you were Assistant Secretary for IO during this period of '67 and then as I remember in the early days of the Nixon administration you came over to NEA.

SISCO: I came over to NEA in about February of '69. I was in IO from '64 through '68.

Q: Of course in that interim period we had the efforts by the UN Special Representative of the period, Gunnar Jarring. I remember Jarring ran into a very frustrating period. Do you think the UN could have done better in that period, looking back on it?

SISCO: Well, the usual criticism of Jarring was that he wasn't active enough, and so on. I think basically that's an unfair criticism simply because of the fact that the UN had no separate power as such, and that what Jarring could do basically really was dependent on what we primarily could do behind the scenes. Jarring was a very able person. I'm really responsible for Jarring having been singled out for appointment. Dean Rusk called me into his office, and said, “We need a UN representative here. Do you have any thoughts as to who it might be?” And after we considered it, I recommended Jarring for the simple reason: a) I knew him. He had had UN experience, he'd been the Swedish ambassador to Moscow, and he'd been the Swedish ambassador to the United States. And I pointed out to Dean Rusk he was just ideal in this regard, and a first rate diplomat. So that we chose Jarring, if you will, and there was never any doubt in that regard.

It was a very frustrating period. He was very cautious, there's no question about it. And he came up with a variety of points during that particular period, but there was just no common ground between the two sides. And at that particular juncture we really were in no position to move things forward. You had, after all, a Security Council Resolution 242 that had been adopted. You had an absolutely overwhelming military victory on the part of the Israelis. The others were the vanquished, and there was no disposition for a serious negotiation at that particular juncture.

Q: And in the meantime, of course, the Israeli problem was made even more difficult by the fact that Begin led his party out of the coalition specifically on the issue that the resolution didn't...

SISCO: ...the non-acceptance really of 242.

Q: That's right. All right then, in 1969 Nixon came in with Henry Kissinger as his National Security Adviser. You came over to the NEA bureau, and there was really a burst of new enthusiasm for the idea of doing something in the Middle East, and of new energy, including a lot that took place in your bailiwick. We had the famous Scranton mission which produced a sort of public affairs bombshell calling for even-handedness, which was new language at the time, followed very quickly by the Four Power talks in New York. At the same time you had a very interesting diplomatic experience in sitting down with Dobrynin and conducting talks attempting to develop a United States-Soviet agreement on the principles of the peace settlement. Tell us about that Joe.

SISCO: Sure. Let me make a comment first of all on the Scranton mission. That was largely a mission whereby Nixon indicated to Scranton he might really take a look at the situation. That was before Nixon took over in any serious sort of way. In fact, if I recall, that may very well have been prior to the actual inauguration, or shortly thereafter.

The genesis is very simple. President Nixon made very clear to me that what he wanted was a test of Soviet intentions in the Middle East. Whether, in fact, they were serious about trying to achieve some progress towards peace, or whether they could live—much better than we felt we could live—with controlled tension in the area. And therefore the first task I had when I came over to NEA as Assistant Secretary was to develop some options. That was also in the context that the French had already taken the lead and called for Four Power talks. Nixon was getting ready in the next few weeks to go to Paris, and both he and Henry Kissinger were very anxious not to affront de Gaulle and they had a substantially deferential view of de Gaulle. There's no question. That came out loud

and clear. So we in NEA developed a set of options based on the fact that the president wanted a real test of the Soviet Union.

And I can recall we had two or three National Security Council meetings at which I made the presentations, laid out the options, and so on. We had a full discussion, and to set the record straight, if one reads the chapter on this period in the first volume of Henry Kissinger's book, I think there are two things that really need to be made very clear. It just is not so that he was not brought into this. He was part of the whole National Security Council mechanism and was at all the meetings, and participated in the discussions. He didn't agree with the decision, although never said so at the NSC meetings. He didn't agree with the fundamental decision that the Middle East was the only area that had been handed over to Bill Rogers, the Secretary of State, by President Nixon. Kissinger was heavily involved with dozens of papers on Vietnam, and the rest of the world, and China, and what have you. So that there was a fundamental cleavage right there, a strong underlying objection on the part of Kissinger that that responsibility had been placed in the hands of Rogers, the Secretary of State, and the Department of State in particular. And he makes no bones about it in his book that all the way along during that period he did whatever he could to deflect, and to defeat, and to spike the whole initiative.

But Nixon was very clear that he wanted a test of the Soviet Union and therefore we began to undertake in detail these negotiations with the Soviets with Dobrynin. Now what is not clear in the historic record that needs to be made clear, and I might add there is a marvelous article that has just come out in the Middle East Journal by David Korn, a former colleague of ours, who covers this entire period in great detail. The instructions were a) a genuine test, and b) we would go ahead in the Four Power talks, but the understanding was that Ambassador Yost could not take a substantive position in those Four Power talks that went beyond the substantive position that we were taking in the bilateral talks with the Soviet Union. And therefore the guidance to New York was really

based on the substantive positions that were evolving in the context of the U.S.-USSR talks in Washington.

I must say I don't think Ambassador Yost liked that too much because he felt confined, but that was the reality of the thing.

Q: Joe, let me just jump in here with a question. As we all know the Israelis over the years have been particularly sensitive to the idea of an imposed settlement from outside. It seems to me that in agreeing to these, not only just one format in which it had that implication, but two formats that Nixon and his lieutenants were laying it pretty heavily on the Israelis.

SISCO: It made the Israelis very nervous because, as you say, a Soviet-American negotiation that fundamentally ran through that whole period of time. The great Israeli fear that an imposed settlement would occur. You will find in the Israeli historical record a contention that they were not kept informed. Not so. They were kept informed all the way along. We regularly called in Rabin as the then Israeli ambassador. We didn't, at that particular juncture, very candidly, make a prior check with the Israelis on a number of the positions that we were taking in our discussions with the Soviet Union. This was a negotiation with the Soviets that was being conducted by the United States, and the Israelis were being kept informed without giving them a veto over the position that we took.

Q: When you got to the point where you were beginning to develop formulations with the Soviets the idea, of course, all along was that as the two sides came closer together, and could agree on things, that we in turn would go back to the Egyptians on the part of the Soviets, and the Israelis on the part of our talks, and try to sell them to those positions.

SISCO: That's correct.

Q: Can you relate these two processes? How far did you get in the first, that is to say U.S.-Soviet formulations, and then what happened with our clients, if you can use that term?

SISCO: Well, with respect to the Soviets, by August or September of '69 we had developed a joint working paper, part of which we negotiated in Moscow. I went to Moscow in July negotiating that with Deputy Minister Vinogradov, and subsequently with Gromyko in Moscow. That working paper by September called for total Israeli withdrawal to the international border, which was the pre-'67 line, subject to three conditions.

Q: Was that in Sinai?

SISCO: In Sinai. Clearly one has to underscore that the Soviet-American negotiation only focused on the Sinai. The Four Power talks went beyond that. They dealt with the Jordanian aspect, and the West Bank, and so on, and we were not keen on those Four Power talks, as you know. They were agreed to largely in deference to de Gaulle, but we used to refer to them as the “two-and-a-half” power talks because we made the assumption the Soviets would be against us, the French did not share our position at that time, and that was two against us. And the British were half-and-half. So we used to refer to them as the “two-and-a-half” power talks at that particular juncture.

But to get back to this, the joint working paper called for total Israeli withdrawal to the international border subject to three conditions. There would be direct negotiations between Egypt and Israel to achieve the following three things: a demilitarization of the Sinai; some sort of a security arrangement along Sharm el Sheikh; and three, that there would be a negotiation that would focus both on the security arrangements and the question of sovereignty in Gaza. That proposition was really never tested, Mike, and I'll tell you why. Because the Soviets went to Nasser and to the Egyptians, and the Egyptian position was; “no”, they didn't want to negotiate those three elements. They wanted the answer to those written right into any treaty. And therefore, what happened was, there was a protracted period of no response from the Soviets. And in the meantime they were beating us over the head from a propaganda point of view in the area distorting our position because we kept those negotiations and the substance of the position quiet as agreed by the two sides. And from the Israeli side, we never really asked them to sign

onto that simply because we didn't have any kind of an answer from the other side. We felt there was no need to involve President Nixon in trying to press a position on the Israelis that was unacceptable to the other side.

Q: Of course, the version that you get from the Egyptians is...

SISCO: ...is just the opposite.

Q: ...is just the opposite. That we were unable to deliver the Israelis on a couple of positions, but you don't think that's a...

SISCO: I'm very aware of this, and that's not the right sequence. That's not the way the procedure developed. We said, “All right. Here it is. Here's the working paper.” We were primarily responsible for drafting most of that, even though it was a joint working paper. Remember, that was a time when the concept of peace as a formal contractual relationship—I can hear Eban's words today—was something which the Arab side had not accepted. So what we were really talking about was a formal peace treaty for the first time. That was what we felt we were getting for the Israelis. So the elements of a treaty were never properly tested. We had a very difficult decision in September, 1969, and it was this: the Soviets were misrepresenting our position publicly in the area Sinai, we had no real conduit to the Egyptians other than through the Soviet Union. We felt we were losing all kinds of ground in the Arab world simply because our position was being distorted publicly by the Soviets. This was so despite the fact the working paper called for total Israeli withdrawal subject to certain conditions; the essence of what the Egyptian-Israeli treaty became later on.

Q: ...the Sisco-Dobrynin talks, and Four Power talks. I wanted to ask, Joe, whether the Egyptians were, at that time, insisting on...were they content to see a negotiation going on between you and Dobrynin that dealt only with the Egyptian-Israeli aspect? Or were they also saying, there has to be a linkage? Or is that something that only appeared later on?

SISCO: No, the linkage came later. That never came up. But you see we also had the Four Power talks going on, so the advantage of the Four Power talks going on was that this forum was focusing on other parts of an possible comprehensive settlement. The Egyptians therefore were not as vulnerable to the Arab argument that a separate peace treaty was being pursued. We saw the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty as an integral part of a comprehensive settlement based on Security Council Resolution 242.

Q: In the end did the talks fail on this specific point, or was it more the overall objective circumstances in the area? Or was it perhaps because we were beginning to get into this bureaucratic problem within the U.S. government of differences between the White House, and the State Department?

SISCO: Well, I think in retrospect, what you've got to say is that the objective conditions for agreement didn't exist in the area, Mike. I don't think Nasser was ready to make peace. I don't think the Israelis were ready. And in that sense, I think that was the fundamental factor. The mistrust, at that particular juncture, was still far too deep. But I would underscore that proposition contained in the joint working paper remained untested. And the reason why Secretary William Rogers made the famous Galaxy speech in October '69 was because our position was being misrepresented in the area by the Soviets. It was felt that we needed to expose the substantive position that we had taken in these talks. And, of course, that really then caused an even greater storm simply because of the fact that while the Israelis were unhappy throughout that whole negotiation, and making that very clear to the White House, as well as to us, the fact of the matter is that when the proposal, which became known as the Rogers plan, was exposed in the Galaxy speech, it made it possible for politicians in Israel to react negatively as well as its supporters in this country. So that chapter closed.

But there is one major result that emanates from that long, drawn out negotiation with the...

Q: ...just on the Rogers, the so-called Rogers plan which was the Galaxy speech. There was no real thought that by running this up on the flag pole publicly, that you might shock the two sides into public acceptance?

SISCO: It was closing a chapter, Mike. Even though the Soviets came in latter in the fall of '69, with a few little wrinkles in their position, it was far too late. It was another lost opportunity. As a result of that, we in the Near Eastern Bureau prepared a memorandum which we sent through the Secretary of State to President Nixon in which we said that, “Mr. President, we've given you the test of the Soviets. The Soviets have failed. They've not been able to produce for whatever reason, their concerns, or the Egyptian, or a combination thereof, and that from here on in, in the peace process, the United States should seek to do this unilaterally.”

This memorandum went to the White House, and I was on a trip in Air Force One, when the President called me into his compartment, with this memorandum right on his lap, underlined all over the place. And we went over it very, very carefully. And President Nixon said, “Joe, I agree fully with this recommendation. From now on we're going to go it alone in the peace process. The Soviets had their opportunity.” The interesting feature is that that decision taken by Richard Nixon became the continuity of the American peace process, the third party role of the U.S. continuing to this day. And I can recall that memorandum. I can recall it underlined. I can recall being on Air Force One, going over the memorandum with President Nixon. And there was no doubt in his mind as to how to proceed. It was a very, very impressive involvement on the part of the President, as far as I was concerned. This was the birth of the unilateral third party role of the U.S. in the Mid East peace process.

Q: And, of course, I think it's fair to say, as you suggested earlier, that the Rogers plan had another legacy, which is that it really set forth many positions which later became embodied in Camp David in the Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

SISCO: Sure.

Q: And this is the way negotiations work. You know, out of many failed examples, sometimes things get put together.

SISCO: If you look at that document, the U.S.-USSR working paper of '69, and then you compare—which I've done, the Egyptian-Israeli treaty—I marvel at the amount of exact verbiage in that Egyptian- Israeli treaty that was contained in that original '69 working paper we produced.

Q: In the meantime, of course, on the ground you had the war of attrition beginning to heat up, which became more and more of a concern and not simply because the Israelis and the Egyptians were having at each other again, but because the Soviets were beginning to get more and more involved, in a very real and unprecedented way. Soviet pilots appeared flying Egyptian MiGs. And even in one instance several of the Soviet flown MiGs were shot down by the Israelis. So things were pretty dicey. But we achieved—certainly one of the major accomplishments of the period—what was called the cease-fire and standstill agreement.

SISCO: Yes. “Stop shooting, start talking” was the phrase that I coined.

Q: Right, right. Well, tell us about that episode, Joe.

SISCO: That was a negotiated cease-fire in 1970. What's amazing about it is that it was done in diplomatic channels. Right from our Assistant Secretary's office in NEA, to Israel, and to Cairo. Dayan being the principal element in Israel. Rabin playing an important role here as Ambassador.

Q: Golda was still Prime Minister?

SISCO: Golda Meir was Prime Minister. What we did was to negotiate the cease-fire, and linked it to a standstill of missiles and a call for indirect negotiations between the parties. In this instance, Ambassador Jarring of Sweden was still involved so that the agreement, this “stop shooting, start talking” initiative, the cease-fire agreement, was encompassed in one UN document. There were two major crises. One was that after we had worked it all out, Golda got cold feet. It had been agreed to by the Israelis, Dayan, and so on. And at about 7:00 o'clock one night Rabin came to my office, very disturbed, and said, “We've run into problems with Mrs. Meir. She wants to talk to you.” And I said to Rabin, “Well, Yitzhak, I can't talk to the Prime Minister. I'm just an Assistant Secretary. Let me report this to the Secretary of State and we'll see what can be worked out.” He said, “No, she wants to talk to you.” And what could I do? So she got on the phone—I have a memorandum of this — we had a fifteen minute discussion in which I said to her that she could not now back off. We had the agreement of the other side. The point of difference was not significant; it emanated from domestic political concerns. Rabin was helpless in the situation because first of all, he had committed himself. He had agreed earlier, with the approval of his Prime Minister and government. Mrs. Meir finally agreed. But the real crisis came later when, as the cease-fire was being implemented, Nasser decided to move his missiles forward into the zone contrary to the standstill element in the agreement.

Q: This was after the agreement?

SISCO: ...after the agreement. There was a cease-fire and a standstill, and there were four or five different points to the standstill as well. Now one of the real difficulties, and I can recall the intelligence people on this, and Ray Cline in particular—he and I worked together on this. We had maps, and the Israelis had maps, but our map and the Israeli map apparently had differences of where the missiles might have been located originally before the cease-fire, and after the cease-fire.

Q: I have to interject here because my memory is quite good. I'd just checked on as your director for Egyptian Affairs, and I went down to the national reconnaissance center down

at Anacostia and looked at the photographs. And mind you, as Director of Egyptian Affairs, I felt I ought to be very skeptical about this and protect my clients if I possibly could. But I came back absolutely convinced, Joe, that there was a problem about the base photography because for some reason the U2...it was not as cloudy...

SISCO: ...cloudy, or something, yes, twenty-four hours later...

Q: But even allowing for that factor, there was just no question that activity was going on. There were two theses and I'd welcome your recollection of how you came out on this. One was that Nasser had been so weakened by the 1967 catastrophe, he was so dependent on the Soviets with Soviets flying his aircraft, that this had to be coming from Moscow. It had to be the Soviets attempting to gain an advantage over the United States which was backing the Israelis. I was always a little skeptical personally and my theory was that Nasser had caught short his own generals—air defense generals—by agreeing to the Sisco plan before the missiles sites could be completed. And that indeed he was weakened but not so much vis-a-vis Moscow, as with his own military. They were saying, "We're not going to be caught with our pants down when warfare resumes."

SISCO: I'm inclined to this latter view. Nasser did have a problem at that particular juncture with his military. I don't know that the record is any clearer today than it was then, but my feeling would be, that was it. The other problem, if you will recall is, that during that period our intelligence people indicated to the Secretary of State that all this Egyptian activity was going on. He did not believe the Egyptians and positioned the missiles forward within the agreed zone. And therefore, we arranged to take him to NSA. I can recall the room was three times this size, and they had all of these photographs pinned on the wall, and they showed him here, here, here. I'd never had had that experience before.

Q: The evidence was unmistakable.

SISCO: It was clear to me that the Egyptians violated the standstill. We went back to State and Rogers was still doubtful. I think that was a mistake. Subsequently, a White

House decision was taken to provide additional arms to the Israelis. In order to rectify the situation, added military assistance was provided to the Israelis. But there was a loss of Egypt's credibility. That was the critical thing.

Q: Of course in September of 1970 we had a momentous change in leadership in Egypt. Nasser died and a new man took over. At the beginning no one thought very much about that. It took about a year or two to develop, but then we entered into a very interesting diplomatic period as it became apparent that there really was a difference in leadership, and a change of mood. You recall that period well. Sadat began to sketch out some ideas. We attempted to grab hold of them. You made a trip to Israel in the summer of 1970, as I remember, to try to sell the Israelis on the idea that Sadat was for real. It was pretty tough to convince them. And then as I recall it, Joe, you got undermined by our own government in what I think would have been the right thing to do. But you tell us about that.

SISCO: We had an NSC meeting in San Clemente. That was at the time of the Nixon-China initiative, Mike. The first part of that meeting was on China and it was about the time that Bill Rogers was informed of the whole China episode. And the second part was on the Middle East. The mandate that I was given by the President with Kissinger right there, was that I was to try to get a modest disengagement of some sort, and that I should push it very hard—I can remember President Nixon's words—"But if you find, Joe, that Mrs. Meir isn't going to buy, don't push it to the point where it creates a major crisis with the Israelis because we will take another crack at her subsequently." I'm almost quoting him literally.

Q: By "subsequently," he had something in mind about elections, I take it, because weren't you coming up to an election period?

SISCO: Yes. In any event, he wanted it pushed, and pushed hard. And so Roy Atherton and I went to Israel. We developed a very modest disengagement proposal. Dayan was very attracted to it. Eban was. And we met for a day and a half with Meir, Dayan; Allon, Rabin; Pares and Eban. Just the two of us. It's good to be young, I did not feel intimidated

at all. We had a very sensible piece of paper. And I can recall my pleading with Mrs. Meir saying, “Look, we're only talking about 500 riflemen crossing the Suez canal. What Sadat needs is merely political symbolism, I know, and that this can be achieved.” Two days of intensive talks. She wouldn't accept it, even though some of her ministers wanted to. That was the time we injected humor in the situation. We needed a little lighter moment or two. The humor that you may not recall, Mike, is as follows: Roy and I stayed at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv the last night. Then on Saturday morning, and we drove to Jerusalem for the concluding session. She had turned it down. We were going to pay our final courtesy call, and say all the right things to keep it open for the next time, as President Nixon had instructed me. I decided to buy her a bouquet of flowers at a stand on the way from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. I walked in, to the Prime Minister's office in the cabinet room, hundreds of photographers, and TV, and so on. And I said—I didn't call her Prime Minister that time—I said, “Golda, I've brought you some flowers.” And she said to me, coyly, “Well, Joe, now you're saying it with flowers. It won't work.” I responded, “I am leaving no stone unturned.” I'll never forget that. It was a marvelously human and funny end to a long, unsuccessful negotiation.

But to get back on the serious side. As I noted earlier several Israeli ministers were in agreement with us, quite desirous of achieving such a disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt, but Mrs. Meir said, no.

Q: What is your reading of her...I mean, was she unhappy with the nature of this proposal, or was she just profoundly skeptical that Sadat could deliver any of this, and that it would lead to something in the interest of Israel?

SISCO: It was not so much the proposal, Mike, it's what you've just indicated. Clearly she kept saying throughout the Arabs are not ready, they don't want to have peace with us, this fellow Sadat is a hothead. She changed her mind years later when Sadat flew to Jerusalem. Sadat did have that kind of a reputation at that particular moment. So, again, I

believe even a modest disengagement agreement proved unachievable because of lack of trust. Just a very, very deep suspicion.

Q: As I recall there was also some...

SISCO: One has to say objectively the correlation of forces, to use a Soviet phrase, favored the Israelis. I mean there was no real threat. Israel had overwhelming military advantage and strength. They had the upper hand in every respect. The objective conditions were such the Israelis did not feel any concessions were necessary.

Q: Yes. As I recall, also, that there was a question of some arms to be delivered, some aircraft, or something like that to Israel at the time, and that you felt strongly that that ought to be brought into play in some way in these negotiations, in trying to bring the Israelis aboard. In the event, however, as I recall, the White House did not agree with that idea.

SISCO: I was trying to use that as an inducement, a carrot. There was never any threat that was involved in terms of a cut-off of military aid. That wasn't in the ball park. But I was using that as an added way to contribute to their security, and to give them greater assurance that their security was not going to be jeopardized.

Q: Yes. But in the end you backed off precisely because the president had put it to you in those terms, which was, don't really drive it to the wall.

SISCO: Right. And you know some things have come out, Mike, we ought to straighten out the record. In Sy Hirshberg's book he indicates that whole mission was just a sheer facade, that there was no serious intent on our part to do anything. Hirshberg's book is very inaccurate on this point. He says in effect that I had been instructed ahead of time to just go through the motions, which of course, was not the case. It was a serious attempt by the U.S.

Q: However, it was the case, I think, that Henry Kissinger as a National Security adviser, was becoming increasingly skeptical of the State Department approach. You could see this developing. In a sense he had a hands-off period for a period of time in '69 although, as you say, his advice was really one of skepticism to begin with. But it became more prominent as time went along, and eventually you got the president listening more to Henry, and less to Rogers and Sisco.

SISCO: It began in an explicit sort of way, Mike. Right after the breakdown of the Egyptian-Israeli cease-fire and the standstill in early '70; it gave Kissinger the opportunity to wrest the initiative from Secretary Rogers. There had been a year of Soviet-American negotiation—Kissinger did not agree with those either—so these two factors led Kissinger to convince President Nixon he should take over. Moreover, Kissinger then had more time for the Middle East. The initiative began to flow to the White House, and it started then with a meeting in New York between Hafiz Ismail and Kissinger.

Q: There were a couple of secret meetings that they had. The State Department was not involved.

SISCO: Well, yes, there was an insistence on my part we not be excluded. I argued forcefully on this, and we were able to include Roy, my deputy, Roy Atherton. I knew that I couldn't press myself into the situation simply because he was seeking to exclude me.

Q: Yes, and of course, those got nowhere.

SISCO: Hal Saunders, Kissinger's Middle East expert on the NSC, was involved on the White House side.

Q: But in the meantime things were...Sadat had quite clearly made up his mind that negotiations would not be possible until there was some kind of new tests of arms, and was preparing for the 1973 war.

SISCO: Well, you remember “the year of decision” by President Sadat. We didn't really take it seriously. We should have, but we didn't.

Q: Coming to that period, you were in the forefront. In 1973, of course, we were all taken by surprise including the Israelis by Sadat's decision. He disguised it very well.

SISCO: Very well.

Q: Let's see, at this point, just in the '73 war, were you still Assistant Secretary of NEA? You were, as I remember it.

SISCO: I had not shifted to Under Secretary until '74.

Q: That war went on for a longer period of time, of course, than the 1967 war, and there were some interesting decisions. At some point during the conflict the United States took the decision that it made better sense not to revert to the kind of 1967 policy decision that we made, but rather to call for a cease-fire in place. What do you recall about that policy decision?

SISCO: It was influenced by the situation on the ground, Mike. First of all when the hostilities started the Israelis assured us they could contain the situation, they could handle the situation militarily. After forty-eight hours, as you well know, the Egyptians were on the verge of a fundamental, major military breakthrough. And it was at that particular juncture the Soviet Union was willing to settle for the then existing status quo on the ground. Subsequently, as the counter force of the Israelis made itself felt, the Soviet position shifted, and they were willing to accept a cease fire based on the original lines.

But what is interesting in that period is this. Kissinger was unfairly criticized by the Israelis as wanting to squeeze them during that particular period in order to achieve political results. That's just not the case. He was very conscious of the fact that after the war—wars are fought for political reasons—and after the war there would have to be some kind of a

negotiation. We made very early contact with Sadat during the period of hostilities. We told Sadat: “When this war ends, we want to sit down with you and work these things out.” That was a very wise move, by Kissinger, and that told Sadat, I think, that in the aftermath of the warfare the Americans were genuinely interested in doing something to move matters toward peace. Sadat was impressed.

The other thing which Kissinger is criticized for, unfairly again, is that somehow or other he held up the aerial resupply effort to the Israelis. Not the case at all. Israeli Ambassador Dinitz came in about the third day of the '73 war in a panic. They needed more equipment, he said, and so on. They were having difficulties on the ground. And at that time the situation was very, very uncertain as to whether the Israelis in fact could contain the situation. Kissinger moved very rapidly to resupply, but quite frankly, there was a disinclination to do anything about that in the Pentagon. I can recall about six different conversations from the top on down by Kissinger, by myself, shouting and arguing—with Pentagon officials at the top—to no avail. And I finally said to Henry, “There's just no way you're going to get this done. You've just got to go to the President, and the President just has to order it.” Up to that time the Pentagon was contending no aircraft were available, that they had to be leased. A preposterous argument. There was a difference of view between State and Defense. Schlesinger did not want it done. And so the President picked up the phone and told the Pentagon to get on with it. The resupply effort then took place and the Pentagon did a fine job once they were allowed to do it. So it was not Kissinger that delayed resupply of the Israelis.

Q: He did, however, squeeze the Israelis pretty hard on the question of encirclement of the Third Army.

SISCO: He certainly did.

Q: And, of course, that was justified because we did have an agreement on a cease-fire.

SISCO: We had an agreement. We'd been to Moscow, and we jointly agreed on the cease-fire, and we got for the Israelis in return the first Soviet endorsement of direct negotiations which became part of Security Council Resolution 338. That it was a remarkable achievement, something the Israelis had sought for years. We drafted that Security Council Resolution 338 in the Kremlin. And it was the only time in my diplomatic history, when from the Kremlin we sent parallel instructions to the Soviet and the American representative at the UN that they were to co-sponsor the Resolution, and get unanimous agreement of the Security Council. We had trouble communicating it because of some problem. Larry Eagleburger had to go to Air Force Two, in order to transmit the cable to New York. That's the human interest side of that episode in October '73. Kissinger saw that political steps would have to be taken in the aftermath of the war, and he moved very rapidly after that. That begins a new chapter, and a very positive chapter. It led to disengagement agreements between Egypt and Israel, and Syria and Israel.

Q: It was a quick-learning experience, I think, for Kissinger, because before the war he really took the position that, "You don't have to worry about the Israelis, they're not going to be challenged militarily, and the United States can rest its interest on Israeli strength in the area." I think many of us in the State Department were skeptical of that proposition, although, of course, we couldn't predict when hostilities might break out.

SISCO: Well, we relied too much on Israeli intelligence before the '73 war. Even on the morning that it all started, we had met within the last 24 hours with both the Israeli and the Egyptian Foreign Ministers. We'd been given assurances by the latter that only military maneuvers were accomplished—that there was no aggression. He did not lie to us. He was not informed by his government. It's interesting because some years later the former Egyptian Foreign minister called me just to reconfirm—his credibility was involved, that he had not lied. The historical record confirms this. We know now on the basis of what Egyptian General Gamasy said to me later, and the book written by Heikal. The Heikal book is very good in this regard in the first chapter. The Foreign Minister was not brought

in by his government. He did not have the information. There were very few people, Mubarak knew it, Sadat and Gamasy knew it, and only a very few others. So we had been given assurances. I said to Henry, “Well, I think based on what we know the Israelis should be able to take care of this.” But we were prudent enough, so that Henry put in a call to our intelligence people, and said, “We want to have your reading as well.” We were relying on Israeli intelligence. But whatever reading they gave us, they too were relying on Israeli intelligence. So it was just a bad, bad intelligence gaff, on the part of the Israelis as well as the United States.

Q: Well, it opened a new chapter. Things began to happen very fast. One of the features of the next chapter was the continuation of the policy which you mentioned earlier, which was we were not giving the Soviets a chance at this new one. Do you think looking back on it that that was a smart policy decision?

SISCO: Oh, it was the right move because we were the third party element that could produce something. The strength of the United States, even to this day in the area, is based on its ability, or inability as the case may be, to achieve political results. Soviet diplomacy at that time was a diplomacy with one arm behind its back. To some degree that is still the case. It had relations with only one side, and even with that one side, it didn't have relations with all of the Arabs. It was in no position to produce anything. Moreover, the Egyptians didn't want the Soviets in. And even when we went on and did the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement, despite the special relationship and all the support that Syrian President Assad has been and continues to receive from the Soviet Union, he didn't want the Soviets involved. And therefore, there's no doubt that nobody other than the U.S. could produce anything. Moreover, the Israelis didn't want the Soviets involved. None of the principal actors, in the region wanted to bring the Soviets into the situation because Moscow was not in a position to bring its influence to bear in order to achieve positive results.

Q: We're now approaching the shuttle period in which you played a key role. I think you went on all of the shuttles. You were drafting many of the positions, conducting much of the diplomacy. Let me ask, Joe, just to begin with, about your impression of Kissinger as a diplomat. There's much...everybody agrees he was an extraordinarily effective person. There's a good deal of material that suggests that he had all of these disparate Middle Eastern leaders practically eating out of his hand. Was he as effective as all that?

SISCO: Yes.

Q: He was remarkable.

SISCO: Yes, absolutely remarkable. He was able to combine overall strategy with tactics. The rapport he struck with all of the Middle Eastern leaders of consequence is unparalleled. King Hussein had great confidence in him. Kissinger was rightly viewed as one who had influence within the administration. Of all people, the people who might have been expected to be more skeptical was not. Kissinger and Saudi King Fahd hit it off very well. King Fahd was taken with Kissinger. Sadat had full confidence in Kissinger. The Israelis expected him to press them very, very hard. With the Israelis, he tried to use the force of his strategic arguments, very rational arguments. As to President Assad, two individuals with great senses of humor. I can tell you dozens of stories in this regard. And Assad just looked forward to seeing Kissinger on all of these occasions. I've never seen in my entire career a case of better rapport that was established by a Secretary of State with leaders in the area during the disengagement agreement negotiating period. It was a remarkable feat. I had my arguments with Henry, and my differences and agreements, but there's no gainsaying: this was a man of great talent, and he applied it very effectively in the Middle East.

Q: You saw a lot of these leaders at the same time. Give us your impressions of them.

SISCO: Assad, in my judgement, probably the most intelligent, the shrewdest, toughest—negotiated every tree in every yard in Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement; was the tactician as well as the strategist; Byzantine, attractive, and strong. A realist. Not anti-American. Rather scathing about the Soviets.

Sadat, as you know, you knew him well, flamboyant. Liked to think and talk in terms of broad strategic sweeps. In part, I think, because Kissinger spoke that way, whereas Assad negotiated every paragraph in the agreement. The two disengagement agreements on the Egyptian side, Sadat was little interested in what was really in the details of the substance. He left it to Fahmy and Gamasy, the foreign and defense ministers respectfully, and whenever a difficulty arose Sadat would break the back of the issue on political grounds rather than other considerations. And both Gamasy and Fahmy were very critical, and very doubtful, about Sadat pursuing the disengagement agreement between Israel and Egypt.

King Hussein, is as he's pictured—courageous, straight forward, a deep friend of the United States at that particular juncture. One fundamental mistake we made, Mike, is that we got a first disengagement agreement with Egypt—then one with Syria. We did not achieve one for Jordan. The picture would have been considerably different, in my judgement. And in retrospect, both Henry and I, I think, made a mistake. Hussein took out a map, and he just wanted minimally a symbolic disengagement. It didn't make any difference, quite frankly. A kilometer here, a kilometer there, but he needed that politically because he was the number one friend of the United States, both Egypt and Syria had achieved a disengagement agreement, and he had not. So we went to the Israelis, and Rabin was then Prime Minister. There were two reasons why we didn't press it forward. One, Rabin said, “I can't take it politically, that if I'm pressed on this right now, I'm going to lose the Prime Ministership.” And we generally tended to give some credence to that argument. The other was more fundamental, and certainly clearer in our own minds. Namely, that we couldn't achieve a Jordanian-Israeli disengagement agreement without the direct involvement of President Richard Nixon vis-a-vis the Israelis. We recalled the

critical concessions made by Israel in the Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement and in the Syrian one. At the decisive moments there were brought about not by Henry Kissinger, but by Richard Nixon, and Richard Nixon's direct involvement with the Israelis. The Israelis were very fearful of President Nixon. Henry, on specific occasions, had to go to the President, and he got Presidential intervention when necessary. Well, we felt that with Nixon being weakened domestically at that particular juncture, that the President could not play the kind of role vis-a-vis Israel which would have been required. And therefore we decided not to go ahead. It's a very sad chapter. That may not have been a correct assessment. But those were the two reasons.

Q: Let's move now. Shortly thereafter, was it 1974, you were brought upstairs as Under Secretary for Political Affairs, the top job for a career person. Tell me a little bit about what you felt, Joe, during that period. That was about a two year period, a three year period?

SISCO: '74 to '76. Just a little bit less than three years.

Q: What were the major problems? We obviously don't have time to cover everything here that you contended with in that position, but give me your impression of the job itself.

SISCO: The job itself, as Kissinger organized it, was a job that could be very substantial, or it could be very limited. While I kept my eye on the Middle East, there were other things —the whole Cyprus crisis came up at that particular juncture, and I was involved in a shuttle diplomacy between Greece and Turkey in that particular period. But candidly, Mike, the best job I ever had in the State Department was the five year period as Assistant Secretary for NEA for all of the difficulties, and doing, as Henry Kissinger says in his book, on many occasions more negotiating between Rogers and Kissinger, than on the substance. But that was by far the most satisfying five years of my entire career.

The Under Secretary's job is one where the geographic bureaus are funneling material through you.

Q: Mr. Secretary, you were saying that if you have a strong Assistant Secretary, he is likely to establish a personal relationship with the Secretary which tends to cut the Under Secretary out, and of course, if you have a strong Secretary of State, it also works in the other direction. You tend to be shuffling things. On the other hand, Joe, the Under Secretary position had some important responsibilities. For example, intelligence operations, also crisis management. You're really the desk officer for every crisis that comes along. Is the job, as it's constituted...does it have to be that way? It seems to me that all Under Secretaries are almost killed in that job, it's so demanding. I guess you have to have somebody in the State Department in that role.

SISCO: Sure. What happens is this, Mike, in very simple language. It is seven days a week, and the reason is that, if you're an Assistant Secretary and you've got a problem, you have two choices. You either call the Secretary of State on Saturday afternoon, or Sunday morning, or you call the Under Secretary of State. And so they used to call the Under Secretary of State. After all, you know very well, they knew me, I knew them. We'd been working together for twenty years. There was Phil Habib in Far East as Assistant Secretary. I think Sam Lewis in those days was IO Assistant Secretary. These are all people that worked together. And David Newsom was on hand, Walter Stoessel was on hand. These are all very, very able people. We worked together well as professionals. In every crisis management, the Under Secretary for Political Affairs is involved. And there are trouble shooting functions such as in Cyprus. A crisis, for example like Indo-Pakistan, was one in which I was heavily involved. However, at that time, I was also a member of the 301 committee dealing also with high level intelligence matters as the State Department representative. I got involved in the major intelligence decisions. We would sit down in the situation room maybe once a week, once every two weeks, whatever it happened to be. The Pentagon would be represented, Bill Clement, Deputy Secretary. The Director of CIA would be there. I would represent the State Department, and there were two or three others, and members of the NSC staff, and certain concrete decisions were taken. There were sensitive decisions. We made sure the Secretary of State was informed and the

President. Or many times we didn't take a decision, but instead made a recommendation to the President.

Q: Do you feel that that worked well? That mechanism itself.

SISCO: Yes it did. I think it worked very well.

Q: Because there have been times, as you know, when the United States government has been accused of not really relating intelligence operations to what the rest of the government is doing.

SISCO: And those were examples where the regular mechanism probably wasn't used. Where you probably had a case of the CIA going to the NSC adviser without the Secretary of State involved. It is a mistake to do it this way. So the mechanism at that coordinating level was excellent. But I'm quite sure not everything came within the framework of the 301 mechanism. I was under no illusions in that regard.

Q: Joe, looking at crisis management more broadly, not just intelligence, what's your judgement as to how well the mechanism responds to it? And how much does it depend on institutional arrangements, and how much of that is irrelevant because in the last analysis you're really dependant on the quality of the leaders that you've got in place?

SISCO: Well, Mike, it's a combination of both. From an institutional point of view, I think we're extremely well organized. We didn't always have a Crisis Management Center as we do, and did, at that particular juncture. I think that mechanism of monitoring, feeding the material at one central point is effective. From my vantage point, and in all candor, I think I've probably been involved in crisis management over the decades as most—from the Bay of Pigs to the Cuban missile crisis, to the Suez crisis, the '73 war, and Cyprus, and Indo-Pakistan. I was involved in every one of these, Mike. I think, institutionally speaking, we are extremely well organized and many, many other countries pattern their institutional arrangements on our own. It's when people try to get around the established

mechanisms that we run into problems. For example, take the Bay of Pigs. The Bay of Pigs was handled—and this is well before your time—through a mechanism where much of the Department of State was cut out. And that causes difficulties. So there are occasions...there are lapses, I think, less of an institutional character, but more of the individuals that are involved. You've got to have people who are conscious of the need to coordinate a whole government.

Q: ...fast enough, for example, if you've got really a hot crisis, does the mechanism allow the process of excluding all those extraneous people? You know, the average day in the State Department you've got to get USIA's clearance, this clearance, that clearance...

SISCO: It is rapid.

Q: Does it escalate at all rapidly so that you've really got a...

SISCO: But, Mike, the key is the Assistant Secretary. The key is the Assistant Secretary. He is in a position to push buttons at the Secretary's level, at the NSC level, and the Presidential level. Just like that. He really is, provided people have confidence in him, and what he's bringing up to them. And therefore, the system can work in a very deliberate, coordinating, slow sort of way, but it can work very rapidly when necessary.

Q: But you need good men in that job.

SISCO: Now I can give you an example of where the system was circumvented. Let me give you an example. I was intimately involved. It was the Palestinian attempt to create a Palestinian state in Jordan, so called “Black September” in 1970.

Q: Yes, we didn't talk about that.

SISCO: The way that was handled, quite frankly, primarily, by three people in the White House. The Secretary of State, the President, and myself, literally in the White House for an extended period of time in which telephone calls in order to get the Israelis to mobilize

their 20,000 forces. I must have had a dozen conversations with the Soviet Union right there in Washington at which we made it very plain that if they didn't put a stop to this thing through the Syrians, that there was no way in which we were going to be able to control the situation, and that if this continued that there was definitely going to be an Israeli intervention militarily. And, of course, at the same time you had the wonderful conjunction of the fact that the Jordanians did well on the ground at a critical point in stemming the attack. And third, there was the realistic assessment of Assad. Assad took the decision for the Syrians that it was really time to back off. So that there was an orchestration politically as militarily. But I'm aghast as to how that was handled. Only a small part of the government was involved. It makes me nervous to this day, it's the wrong way to do it.

Q: It turned out well, but it can turn out poorly also.

SISCO: Yes. One thing I learned in my career is that there were cases where one superior may be on the margin. It doesn't help your career to be heavily involved, and your superior marginally involved. I can remember during the Congo crisis when President Kennedy decided to call me several times during the period. He was prone to do that. I found it embarrassing to then report the conversation to my superior who obviously had been bypassed. It was an uncomfortable situation.

Q: I got one myself.

SISCO: And I got into trouble with my Assistant Secretary as a result of it. I had nothing to do with it. Well, that happened on other occasions later on. The only individual that was tolerant of that, when he knew that this was happening and it was not the fault of the recipient of the telephone call, was, God bless him, Dean Rusk. He really understood when that sort of thing happened and didn't blame the innocent recipient. But I'll tell you, it is hurtful. President Nixon used to call me, at home. And he'd say, “Well, you know, Henry is unhappy about this” and so on. He said, “You know, Joe, you ought to...maybe we can do this...” Amazing! On several occasions when Henry Kissinger was unhappy

with Bill Rogers, the President of the United States called me at home with a suggestion as to how I might keep calm the situation. President Nixon did not want to confront either Rogers or Kissinger. This sort of thing causes trouble for the professional within the bureaucracy. I remember President Johnson in this regard. Ambassador Goldberg had made a recommendation. This was only three or four weeks after I had taken over as Assistant Secretary for IO. Johnson had fired the previous Assistant Secretary, and I'd gone to Goldberg and said to Goldberg, “You're the new United States Ambassador to the UN (I had never met Goldberg before) I'll be glad to resign so that you can pick your own Assistant Secretary.” And he said, “No, I would like you to continue.” Three weeks after he took over, and I took over—we took over at the same time—he sent a memorandum recommending that the UN Security Council be involved in Vietnam. And I had tried to discourage Goldberg from doing it because, first of all, what he wanted done couldn't be done within the framework of the Security Council. I did an analytical memo for him. He was just hell-bent on doing it. So the Acting Secretary of State, George Ball, called me and said, “What about this?” And I said, “Look, I tried to discourage him, and here are the reasons why we should not do this. We'll end up having to veto what is going to be produced. Here's what will be produced.” It will be against us, and we will end up vetoing the resolution, and it will be a great propaganda loss, let alone we won't achieve a UN involvement of a positive character. Ball communicated that to Johnson orally. President Johnson calls me, and he says, “Joe, we're having an NSC meeting at Camp David tomorrow. I want a memorandum on my desk tonight.” This was Saturday afternoon at two o'clock. “I want a memorandum on my desk by the first thing tomorrow morning giving me your views on the pros and cons of moving this matter into the Security Council.” So here I am, Goldberg saying yes, the President not wanting to go. So I called Ball, and I said, “George, the President just called me and he wants me to do a memo giving him my views. What do you want me to do?” He was the Acting Secretary of State. He said, “Joe, just put it down as you see it.” Which I did precisely. And then, according to Bob McNamara, the next morning, Johnson reads the entire memorandum to all of the NSC, including Goldberg, in which I opposed Goldberg's views. This is the third week of my

relationship with Goldberg. I figured a week from now he's going to go to the Secretary of State and ask that I be fired. But he didn't, and he respected the differing view.

It also happened on India, and Pakistan where Kissinger and I disagreed on an intelligence report. There was an intelligence report that came in which said that there was a cabinet meeting in which the Indians intended to go beyond separating Bangladesh from Pakistan, but also to pursue military operations in order to destroy effectively the overall military capacity of Pakistan for an indefinite period. I cast doubt on the memorandum, which came from dubious sources. I argued strongly against it saying that's not the assumption on which we should be operating. This was in a NSC staff meeting, and Kissinger carted me to the President's office and, of course, what he did not tell me, and what the President didn't tell me was, that they were then using the Pakistanis as a conduit in opening the door to China. That was the main reason for a distorted tilt towards Pakistan.

Q: ...when you're not fully cognizant of...exactly, the dangers of it. Well, Joe, let me take just a few moments, because we've got to bring this to a close. We've gone through the historical part, but let me ask you a few questions that really look back on your experience. If you look back over a 40 year span of policy making in the Middle East, how do you evaluate our performance in this area? And I think of it really in two terms, as an old practitioner myself, one being the policy itself, and then the implementation of it.

SISCO: One, you can't get anything done unless there's direct Presidential involvement at the key points. Two, you've got to be very sure that both your external, as well as your domestic position is unassailable and strong, and defensible because of the close domestic-external interaction on this policy. Three, I felt that in the earlier phases, in the disengagement phase, that on the whole it was a sensible policy substantively. Under the Reagan administration the policy has tilted too much. On occasions, the tail was wagging the dog. For example, the whole Lebanese '82 episode is one that we might have contributed to inadvertently; rather than being leaders on this, we were being led. I feel we

are still the indispensable element in the area. I don't feel that since the Egyptian-Israeli treaty there have been occasions during the Reagan Administration that we pursued the peace powers with the required activism and persistency. For example, there was the '82 plan of Reagan which was an entirely sensible plan, in my judgement. But I don't think we pursued it with the kind of vigor and high level involvement which promotes success. In the last decade we just haven't been willing to put sufficient political capital domestically on this particular issue in order to achieve some results.

Q: I think you're right. Do you think the Israelis now almost count on their ability to outlast our own political domestic political cycle?

SISCO: To some degree, yes. The differences have most often been with the executive branch, much less so with the congress.

Q: And is that an insurmountable problem? Or can really effective leadership overcome?

SISCO: No, it's not insurmountable. Looking ahead to the decade of the '90s, if this revolution of '89, and all the forces of democracy, all of these changes and peaceful resolution of Central America—Angola, Namibia, Cambodia, Eastern Europe, and the like continue—the Middle East is going to remain resistant indefinitely. I happen to believe that the area is at a watershed today. I detect that people on both sides of this issue, desire a settlement, but the flexibility is lacking. I think the problem in Israel right now is the lack of consensus. There are understandable genuine concerns that whatever new arrangement be one that is secure. On the Palestinian side, there is the drive for legitimacy and an entity of the area. I find this particular juncture hopeful in the limited sense that global events are working in the direction of heavier pressures on both sides to begin to find a way to resolve the intractable. For example, certain Arab states will be less seen as strategic allies of the Soviet Union than before. And likewise, from the point of view of Israel. Will it in the long run be viewed as important strategically in a post cold war environment? The strategic alliance argument with respect to both sides may very well

carry less weight. That's a geopolitical reality that, in my judgement, becomes an added factor in this situation. There are underlying political geopolitical factors that are working in favor of some kind of a settlement of the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Q: That's very interesting. You've seen a lot of the Executive Branch, Congressional coordination problems of one sort or another over the years. It's a very...I suppose its a very chaotic system of government. It seems to me, Joe, even though we all live under the Constitution here, that Congress in a way has become much worse in terms of its intervention in international affairs, and foreign policy. Much more decentralized, disorganized, and therefore irresponsible than it was in earlier periods. Do you have any comments about this?

SISCO: Yes, I do. I've given this a lot of thought, Mike. In fact I've done more study of this in the last decade than you can possibly imagine. Our most productive periods historically, Mike, have been periods of strong executive leadership, supported by a bipartisan Congress. From World War II to Vietnam there was a consensus in our country, both on foreign policy and security policy. Sure there were differences between political parties, but never a fundamental difference. Vietnam fractionalized that consensus, and Watergate weakened the institution of the Presidency. And since then we've been trying to recapture the kind of executive-legislative cooperation that makes for a consensus, predictability, and certitude as to the direction of American foreign policy. We haven't recaptured that. There's been some improvement since Vietnam. That's one dimension.

The other dimension is that Congress in the past had members in it that were more subject to party discipline than they are now. You have PAC money. The reason why 98% of the members of Congress were reelected this last time, is simply because there need not be any party discipline that one finds in a parliamentary system. And therefore, in the aftermath of Vietnam, there came into being a so-called resurgent Congress where there were clusters of groups on each specific issue, rather than an overall strategic approach. Not only a cluster on specific issues, but the enhancement of special interests,

and special interest issues in the Congress. And therefore you have a Congress that itself does not have its house in order. And what is interesting is, that you have at this juncture a Democratic House, and a Democratic Senate, and you would think that a majority of the same party could find a consensus. They're not able to do that because historically there has been a liberal wing of the Democratic party, as well as a conservative wing.

So our problem in terms of foreign affairs is that there has to be strong executive leadership in order for our system to work. The nadir was under Jimmy Carter because the Carter administration took a position, and the Congress, on a number of instances, reversed it. And the whole Iran hostage thing really brought it to the bottom. There was some slight recuperation of this under Reagan, and then Iran-Contra undermined it again.

Now President George Bush is giving a different kind of leadership. What people don't understand is, that the objective conditions externally facing the United States have changed. We moved from a unilateral dominance by the United States in the immediate days after World War II to a bi-polarity between the United States and the Soviet Union for a given period. And now we are developing with Japan, EC-92, Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, a multi-center world in which the relative power of the United States—not the absolute power—the relative power of the United States is diminished largely because of the fact that the objective political-economic conditions are changed. Leadership does not mean that you have to be way out in the front. What we are doing in relationship to Eastern Europe right now is the most effective leadership that we could be giving. Our press plays this as the decline of the United States. Some academes, such as Kennedy, have written a book that says that all this represents the decline of the United States. It's not the case. Even with our budget deficits, even with the fact that we should be able to find, or we need to find, more money resources, if you will, for Panama, for Nicaragua, for Eastern Europe, and now Secretary Baker in Namibia. We are hamstrung in that regard. In the literal sense, if there is political will, the money is there, or the capacity is there.

Our budget deficit is about 3% of our trillion dollars GNP, and it needs to be addressed seriously if American leadership abroad is to be maintained.

So that when you look at foreign affairs it's a question of executive leadership. Congress is reluctant to confront a President with 70% favorable rating in the polls. I am a strong believer in executive leadership. There is a propensity to micro-manage foreign policy on the Hill which is not good for the country and for our leadership. But again, this is part of the political process. You take this Congress right now, excellent leadership in Tom Foley and Senator Mitchell, but they're not able to develop an alternative strategy to what the administration has, President Bush has taken hold of the center politically. My own feeling is that we're going to see the constellation of political alignment, as we have right now, probably for the rest of the decade of the '90s.

Q: Those are very shrewd comments. The democrats have to put their own house in order, and as you say, that has been terribly difficult certainly. Finally, Joe, because we have to bring this to a stop, let me just ask you briefly about the principle of careerism in the government. The United States, compared with European parliamentary democracies, has a really large shift of personnel when a new administration comes in, and there's a change of leadership. Do we carry that too far in your view? Is it appropriate? Is it energizing to the government? And what is your view really of the balance within the Department of State—how the political level relates to the Foreign Service, the career officers?

SISCO: The changes of administration are energizing, there's no question about it. One of the reasons why we've lost a little continuity, in terms of the continuity of the professional level, is that if you go back to the 60's we had a period of some fifteen years where we kicked out one President, namely Nixon; we defeated another President, namely Ford; we assassinated another President, Kennedy it was short lived; Carter got himself defeated; and the continuity of the eight year presidency was lost for a given period of time. And therefore, that tends to add far more frequent change in the professional bureaucracy than even normal. Now to the degree to which, for example, you have eight year presidencies,

then a change in professional assignments can come about in an orderly fashion. These are jobs that drain one emotionally, physically, and so on. You just can't do a top job that long.

On the other hand, it's a question of balance. I would like to see a situation where not the entire team necessarily is cleared out at the top in the State Department with every Administration change. It is understandable that a new Secretary of State comes in and he wants his own people. Most of the time good sense has prevailed. One difficulty has been how to move a group of political advisors involved in a political campaign, into the bureaucracy and responsible policy positions.

So I have no clear cut answer and that is, that I think changes the professional service have to be approached judicially, prudently, and I don't really think that the assumption should be that one clears house entirely, and this massive change of ambassadors all over the world takes place in the span of a few months. At the moment the tilt in the direction of politically appointed ambassadors, rather than professionals. But I'm confident the balance will be restored. I don't want to be misunderstood. I think the mixture of professionals and public figures is a good idea. I believe that it does bring new disciplines, and new experiences into the Service which is all to the good. And this interaction is to the good. But I think that a balance does have to be maintained, and in particular this practice of bringing in inexperienced people in critically important posts, I think is one where we really put ourselves at a disadvantage. The role of the ambassador, as the result of modern technology, has been diminished. But it is still very important.

I'll tell you an amusing story. President Nixon came to me and said, “Joe, I want to help you in any way I can. Is there anything I can do for you? I know you've got a Ph.D. in Soviet Affairs. Would you like to become the Ambassador to the Soviet Union?” And he offered it to me twice. And I turned it down both times. I said, “Mr. President, I'm going to tell you why I don't want it.” He said, “Why is that?” I said, “You know, you and Henry Kissinger are the Soviet desk officers in this administration. And if you sent me to

Moscow...” I said, “First of all I won't go, but if I went, you'd have a personnel problem in six weeks.” Mac Toon, who served well as our ambassador in Moscow, used to just be so unhappy simply because Dobrynin had all the access, and poor Mac Toon couldn't even get through the front door to see Mr. Gromyko more than once every three months or so.

I think we've got the best professional service in the world. And I see it even more clearly now that I'm outside of government. I go see people at the desk level once a week in my current work. The professionalism is just absolutely outstanding. I worry about their inability to move up rapidly enough, and I worry about decisions that are taken at times where the professionals are really not being consulted. They have an expertise to contribute which is essential. A number of the mistakes we've made historically over the last 15 or 20 years, have normally been in part as a result of the people who really know not being consulted. So we do move too many people too rapidly, and I think we need to strike a better balance.

Q: Joe, thank you very much. It's been a great interview.

End of interview